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ABSTRACT

A study performed in 1962 by Norbert Elias on the adjustment of young people to the transition from school to work had five areas of inquiry; adjustment to relationships with older workers and supervisors; adjustment to job problems; adjustment to role as workers; adjustment to role as money-earner in home relations; and adjustment to role as money-earner in leisure time. The study was an interview-based survey of nearly 900 young adults. The original study concluded that there is a "shock" experience during the transition from school to work young people have difficulties adjusting to the new role and in their relationships with older workers, their family and their income. However, a current look at the original interviews and background materials and concludes that while shock is experienced, it was not to the degree predicted. The origins of the shock conclusion are unclear, there may be differences between the experiences of working class and middle class youth, and it may not be shock that emerges from the difference between the expectations of work and the actual experience of work. (SLR)

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Forty Years On: Norbert Elias and the Young Worker Project [1]

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Abstract

Forty years ago, in 1962, fieldwork began on the research project '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*'. Using archived materials relating to the little known Norbert Elias project, this paper has two aims. First, to present some background information on the research and introduce this aspect of Elias's work to a wider audience beyond the few who were aware of the projects existence. Second, to explore in detail Elias's contributions to the project by piecing together his ideas and hypotheses from archived materials. During the early stages of the research, Elias suggested that the transition from school to work constituted a 'shock' experience and that young people would experience initial difficulties in adjusting to their new role. He suggested that difficulties would emerge in their relationships with older workers, with family and with their new income. For the first time this paper presents Elias's 'shock' hypothesis, and his thoughts on school to work transitions. Although later analysis suggested that, in the main, young people did not experience 'shock' on entering work (see Ashton and Field 1976) it is felt that a full exploration of Elias's model is worthwhile as it adds yet a further dimension to the richness and applicability of his other writing. The paper concludes by reflecting on the limitations of the Elias shock hypothesis.

Introduction

> In the early 1960s Elias also successfully applied for a major research grant...to investigate school leavers' adjustment to working life. The results of this 'Young Worker Project' eventually appeared in publications by colleagues at Leicester, not by Elias himself (Mennell 1992: 21-22).

Forty years ago, in 1962, fieldwork began on the research project '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*'. Led by Norbert Elias, researchers at the University of Leicester carried out an interview based survey of the school to work transition experiences of nearly nine hundred young adults. The Department for Scientific and Industrial Research (D.S.I.R.) awarded the project £15,081 for three years beginning on the 1st April 1962. The research was based on Elias's assertion that the transition from school to work constituted a 'shock' experience and that young people would experience real difficulties in adjusting to their new role as adults and workers. Suggesting that much of the early research on young people was essentially 'adult centred' and based on the experiences and perspectives of adults rather than the young people themselves, Elias argued that his approach would be radically different from other studies of the time (such as Carter 1962) as

> Adult investigators are apt to investigate either their own problems with regard to young people or, more generally, the problems which adults experience so far as the younger generation is concerned, not problems which confront, and which are experienced by the young generation itself (Elias 1962a: 1).

Rather than focusing on such 'adult' concerns, Elias wrote, in the original grant application, that this project would be

> ...concerned with the problems which young male and female workers encounter during their adjustment to their work situation and their entry into the world of adults. When they go to work, or begin to train for work, young workers have to make a wider adjustment to a situation and to roles which are new to them, whose implications are often imperfectly understood by them and by the adults concerned, and for which they are in many cases not too well prepared (Young Worker Project, 1962b: 2).

This broad position was then translated into five specific areas of enquiry – *adjustment to relationships with older workers and supervisors*; *adjustment to job problems*; *adjustment to role as workers*; *adjustment to role as 'money-earner' in home relations*; and *adjustment to role as 'money-earner' in leisure time*. Initially the idea was for the

data to be collected via interviews, informal discussions, case studies and participant observation, however only interviews were used. The interview schedule was semi-structured but the responses tended to be open-ended, textual and reflective in nature. It contained a series of 82 questions in five sections - Work, Family and Expenditure, Leisure, School and Work, and General. The interviewers were asked to write all answers to questions verbatim if possible and always in as full detail as the time and circumstances allowed. The sample of young adults was drawn from the Youth Employment Office index of all Leicester school leavers from the summer and Christmas of 1960 and the summer and Christmas of 1962. At the end of the fieldwork in 1964 882 interviews, plus a pilot survey of 28 interviews had been completed.

However, at the start of the research in 1962, the researchers involved with the project were unaware that Elias had arranged to take up a Chair in Sociology at the University of Ghana from the October of that year. Although Elias attempted to direct the project remotely via a research committee, problems with working practice emerged, the Research Officers[2] on the project resigned and other members of staff distanced themselves from the research. The project then became characterised by acrimony, distrust and feelings of failure, and entered the 'Leicester air' as something never again to be referred to. With the exceptions of Keil *et al* (1963b), Ashton (1973, 1974) and Ashton and Field (1976) in which a sample of the cases or background literature were used, and despite being one of the largest government sponsored projects on young workers of the time, the findings and emerging themes from this project have remained largely unanalysed and unexplored for nearly forty years.

Recently nearly nine hundred of the original interview schedules and some background materials have been recovered from where they were archived by Ashton in the mid 1970s. Using this material and other archive documents, it is possible, for the first time, to examine Elias's thoughts on school to work transitions and explore his 'shock' hypothesis in more detail. As such, the remainder of the paper will be structured as follows. First, the possible reasons as to why this Elias project has remained unexplored are considered. The discussion then moves on to a consideration of Elias's shock hypothesis. This will be done by using his writings, minutes of meetings and correspondence relating to the young worker project. In order to explore and understand Elias's approach and ideas on shock, the intention is to set this discussion in the context of some of his other writings. Finally, the discussion will conclude by reflecting on the limitations of the shock hypothesis.

Ignored or Lost? Elias and Youth Transitions to Work Situations

There have been a number of very important discussions of Elias's work (Mennell 1992; Hughes 1998; Krieken 1998; Smith 2000) and there have been those of who have taken Elias's ideas and applied them to a broad range of concerns and areas of enquiry (Dunning 1981, 1999; Krieken 1989, 1999; Hughes 1997; Fletcher 1997; Pratt 1999; Turner 1999; Smith 2000a; Tabboni 2001). The broad range of applications of Elias's work reflects Elias's own concern to explore the breadth of social phenomenon, in a variety of fields of sociology, in order to demonstrate that a long term, dynamic (rather than static) framework offers a better understanding and leads to a more adequate enquiry. According to authors such as Mennell (1992) and Krieken (1998) (and even Elias (1970) himself) Elias was unique, given the increasing division of labour amongst sociologists, in that he wrote across so many substantive areas and the value of his work is its interconnectedness (Mennell 1992: 279-280). As such Elias's interest in youth transitions to work and adulthood is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is that no one has engaged directly with, or explored fully, Elias's interest in youth transitions or his foray into the arena of large-scale government funded research in this area, this despite Szakolczai's (2000) assertion that the main aspects of Elias's life and work are well researched and well known. The project '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*', has received scant attention within the existing literature on Elias and remains largely unknown outside of the University of Leicester or those fully familiar with every aspect of Elias's life and work. Indeed most introductions to Elias don't mention this research at all (see Fletcher 1997; Krieken 1998; Hughes 1998; Korte 2001) nor does Elias mention the project in his autobiographical writings (Elias 1994). The exception to this is Mennell (1992) in which the young worker project receives the very briefest of mentions. Whilst this is a tantalising reference, Mennell (1992) does not explore the reasons why Elias did not publish the findings himself nor does Mennell provide any additional detail on this 'major' research grant obtained by Elias. There are, perhaps, a number reasons for this, and it is possible that Brown (1987) points the way

> Someone who had thought so long and to such good effect about sociological problems as he had could find it difficult to understand why others did not see things as he did, or to take on board ideas and points of view different from his own. There was in my experience one major disagreement about the conduct of a research project which proved quite damaging to all concerned and to the progress of the research (Brown, 1987: 538).

One reason that may have discouraged a fuller discussion of this project is the problematic and difficult circumstances that surrounded the end of the data collection in 1964. Some of the problems surrounding this project, and the reasons for the resignation of the original Research Officers have been reflected on with elsewhere but have never been published[3]. Suffice to say there were three main substantive areas of concern, including an ongoing disagreement over the researcher's rights to publish. Despite the Research Officers' eagerness to publish the results from the research, Elias vetoed the publication of an article they had written and instructed that there should be no publications or interim reports based on the data. Second, Elias's remoteness in Ghana and the acknowledged difficulties in having an 'intellectual' discussion over such a great distance also caused problems. This, coupled with the slow break up of the research committee set up to support the researchers in Elias's absence, meant that miscommunication and misunderstanding was rife.

A third area for disagreement, and perhaps the main area of complication, was an ongoing debate between Elias and the Research Officers as to the nature of the theoretical framework and the composition of the sample. From the outset of the research, Elias was keen to capture the initial experiences of young people entering the workplace as he felt that the young people's experience prior to school would not prepare then for what was to come. However, according to Elias, the Researcher Officers had interpreted the early discussions to mean that this research was to be a study of 'work' *per se*. They identified their problem as

> ...given such a number of young people from known schools, home backgrounds, and work situations, what is their experience when they become workers ?...[We] do not think we should be content with knowing that they have difficulties and to what extent...but wish to distinguish certain factors which make for certain types of experience in the work situation. (Keil *et al* 1963a: 2)

Elias argued that the study should not be about work but instead the 'work situation' as many of the problems faced by young people rarely sprang from work *in isolation* of other situations. For Elias this came much closer to offering a better understanding of the problems faced by young workers than could be offered by a study of 'work'. As for the research problem of the Research Officers, Elias suggested that their approach was simply trying to look for causal relationships between the different aspects of the sample. Elias felt that such an approach was far too conventional and ignored the relationships and processes that surround the work situation that constitute the young

workers experience. In response to their initial theoretical problem, Elias suggested that their working hypothesis

> ...is even worse. It is based on the idea...that men's [sic] attitudes and behaviour are the passive effects of a social environment here represented by A, B and C. It has been by now fairly widely accepted that this type of billiard ball causality: Billiard ball B (behaviour and attitudes) in its course determined by the movement of Billiard ball A (Features of the background...features of the work situation, labour market), does not provide a very suitable model of thinking in relation to what one actually observes. I would suggest that the Research Officers think of the experiences of the young workers...[and] that they cease to think in wishy-washy terms like 'Background' or 'Features of the Background' and learn to think in situations as wholes, in configurations...(Elias, 1963: 7)

According to Elias (1963), the differences in the understanding of his ideas and concepts, contained within the original grant application, meant that the researchers were undertaking a different project to that originally proposed by him. The ongoing misunderstandings over research direction, and Elias's constant suggestion that the researchers lacked even a basic understanding of what the research was about, led the researchers to perceive that Elias had no real confidence in them or their ability.

There were similar differences of opinion about the composition of the sample. Discussions as to the exact composition of the sample took place throughout 1962 and culminated with the agreement that the investigation would be restricted to all those working in Leicester who had worked for less than one year. It was also agreed that the sample would be further stratified into four occupational categories or skill levels -- unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled and clerical. However, it was as suggested by the Research Officers and Brown *et al* (1963) that limiting the sample to those who had less than one years experience of work would reduce the possibility of exploring the shock thesis that Elias intended. They argued that the younger members of the sample had hardly had time to get over the excitement at not having to adhere to the rigid discipline of school and earning money to experience the 'shock' that Elias refers to (Brown *et al* 1963). Riddell and Keil (1963a) also expressed their concerns that the sample should not be stratified in terms of skill level as they had doubts as to how accurately the Youth Employment Service had recorded this information.

Over and above the operational issues of the research, the second reason why this project may have received little attention in the Elias literature is that it may have been perceived by later scholars as a 'Departmental' project and not really part of Elias's body of work.

Indeed, Elias referred to the project as a 'Departmental' project and the early minutes of meetings identify it as such. Likewise the 'staffing' of the project in the early phases of research comprised a number of members of the sociology department at Leicester including Illya Neustadt, Sheila Williams (now Allen), Percy Cohen, Richard Brown and Anthony Giddens[4]. However, there are a number of problems with this view. Elias was involved in the development of the proposal, wrote a number of memoranda on the aims and focus of the project and commented on the design of the research instrument. Elias insisted that his view and his approach to the research be adhered to or suggested that he himself would resign from the research project (Elias 1963). Elias was involved in the appointment of the original research team and those later who were appointed to try and revive the project. Elias attended numerous meetings on the project before he left for the University of Ghana, and during his vacations from Ghana. Whilst in Ghana, Elias corresponded regularly about the research with Neustadt, and the other members of the team. In Neustadt's correspondence with Elias regarding the project, Neustadt sought and always deferred to Elias's views in relation to the research despite the fact that Neustadt was the Head of Department at the time (see Neustadt 1964). In the final stages of the research it was to Elias that the original research team wrote, explaining their reasons for resigning from the project. Finally, Elias expressed, and eventually got, his wish to return to Leicester as a Senior Research Fellow and to supervise the young worker project (see Neustadt 1964).

Third, although, as Krieken (1998) notes, the issue of the transition from childhood to adulthood is interwoven with Elias's other concerns (see Elias 1980), Elias's writings on young workers have never before been published and remain embedded within his own notes, minutes of meetings and various memoranda. However, archive material[5] clearly indicates that Elias maintained his interest in young people's adjustment to work from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s and hoped that something would eventually happen to the data collected from the '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*' project over a decade earlier. The young worker project was a huge undertaking and is clearly something that instilled in Elias a certain amount of regret for lost opportunities. It is also clear that Elias had also learned something from the experience. For example, roughly ten years after the project abruptly ended, Jennifer Platt interviewed Elias for her book *The Realities of Social Research*. In correspondence with her, Elias suggested 'the fact that a questionnaire designed and interviews conducted under the influence of divergent views cannot be salvaged by a later effort, was for me a lesson which I shall not forget' (Elias, 1972a: 1-2).

Whatever the reasons for the obscurity of this major area of research within the body of work by, or about Elias, it is clear that Elias was sufficiently involved with the project and his ideas determined the direction of the research to warrant a fuller exposition. A consideration of the shock hypothesis will now be offered.

Elias and the 'Shock Hypothesis'

As suggested above Elias's contributions to the research project *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* have received scant attention, and as such, the only really full source of documentary evidence on the project is the archive collection of Elias papers at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, Germany. From the inventory to the Elias papers two files were identified that related to the running of the young worker project and the academic issues that underpin the research and informed its inception. Alongside these files are a further ten folders labelled 'y-worker' containing additional paperwork, draft papers and various other documents relating to Elias's (and his colleagues) interests in the transition from school to work. Additionally, some of the original research team had also retained copies of their young worker documents including minutes of meetings, correspondence with Elias and memoranda. Together, all these documents provide some insight into the project and highlight much of Elias's 'transition as shock' hypothesis. However, using material from sources such as this does have potential problems. For example, there are obvious difficulties in the piecing together of different aspects of an approach from such secondary sources and this could lead to an imperfect understanding. Likewise problems emerge in that one did not observe first hand the interactions or discussions which took place regarding Elias's original approach. As such it is difficult to see the full genesis of the ideas or how they were shaped via the discussion that took place. Questions must also be raised about the extent to which these documents accurately record the discussions that took place and about selectivity in terms of what archive material was retained and what was discarded.

Yet despite these concerns, piecing together Elias's original thoughts on this research and his shock hypothesis remains a worthy task as it adds a further dimension to Elias's own writings and illustrates some of the themes Elias dealt with elsewhere in his work. Similarly, as this was Elias's only foray into publicly funded, large-scale social research, it is clearly worth documenting his ideas and approach. In doing so the use of the archive materials outlined above is inevitable as this is all that survives in terms of the project.

Remarkably, the archive documents do indicate a consistency in Elias's thoughts regardless of whether they are recorded in minutes, correspondence or memoranda. From this archive material and Elias's writings on youth transitions, it is clear that Elias identified eight specific problems relating to the transition to adulthood that contributed to the experience of transition as a one of shock. They are i) *the prolonged separation of young people from adults*; ii) *the indirect knowledge of the adult world*; iii) *the lack of communication between adults and children*; iv) *the social life of children in the midst of an adult world with limited communication between the two*; v) *the role of fantasy elements in the social and personal life of the young vis-à-vis the reality of adult life*; vi) *the social role of young people is ill-defined and ambiguous*; vii) *striving for independence through earning money constitutes a new social dependence (on work rather than parents)*; viii) *the prolonging of social childhood beyond biological maturity.*

In the discussion that follows particular attention will be given to the role of indirect knowledge of the adult world and role fantasy versus the reality of adult life in the shock experience. These will be set in the context of Elias thoughts on the individual civilising process, or the process through which children and young adults learn adult behavioural norms.

Elias and Process Sociology

Elias's approach to sociology has, over the past fifteen years or so, become more widely understood and the main features of his approach have been fully examined and outlined elsewhere (Arnason 1987; Kilminster 1987; Mennell 1992; Hughes 1998; Krieken 1998; Smith 2000). However, one of the principles of Elias's figurational of processual sociology pertinent to this discussion is his approach '...to human beings as interdependent, forming figurations or networks with each other which connect the psychological with the social, or habitus with social relations' (Krieken, 1998: 49). (Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998: 15). Moving towards a more adequate understanding of this link between processes of change in social relations and change in the psychic structure is the basic aim of Elias's *The Civilising Process* (Mennell and Goudsblom 1998; Hughes 1998). In this text Elias explores how changes have taken place in the standards of behavioural expectations (Hughes 1998: 140) and he discusses the shift in people's behaviour towards higher degrees of self-restraint which accompanied the increasingly elaborate nature of etiquette codes in the middle ages. To explain this, Elias

drew on Freud's notion of the super-ego and argues that through the civilising process the psychic structure of people is transformed.

> The pronounced division in the 'ego' or consciousness characteristic of people in our phases of civilization, which finds expression in such terms as 'superego' and 'unconscious', corresponds to the specific split in the behaviour which civilized society demands of its members. It matches the degree of regulation and restraint imposed on the expression of drives and impulses...This is what is meant when we refer here to the continuous correspondence between the social structure and the structure of the personality, of the individual self. (Elias, 2000: 160)

However, for Elias, unlike Freud's (1930) approach, this process was not static and the super-ego changes constantly with the changing social code of behaviour.

> ...it is the web of social relations in which individuals live during their most impressionable phase, that is childhood and youth, which imprints itself upon their unfolding personality in the form of the relationship between their controlling agencies, super-ego and ego and their libidinal impulses. The resulting balance...determines how an individual person steers him or herself in his or her social relations with others...However, there is no end to the intertwining...it never ceases entirely to be affected by his or her changing relations with other throughout his or her life. (Elias, 2000: 377)

This process of constant change Elias conceptualised as the inter-relationship between *sociogenesis* and *psychogenesis*. Sociogenesis being the processes of development and transformation in social relations with psychogenesis being the processes of development and transformation in the psychology, personality or habitus that accompany such social changes (Krieken 1998). In this sense habitus, or an individual's personality makeup, is not inherent or innate but 'habituated' and becomes a constituent part of the individual by learning through social experience and, according to Krieken (1998), develops as part of a continuous process beginning at birth and continuing through childhood and youth (Krieken, 1998: 59). Given the interrelationship between sociogenesis *and* psychogenesis, Elias argued that the socialisation of children cannot take place behind closed doors and the learning of adult behaviours is only possibly due to the presence of others. Indeed, Mennell and Goudsblom (1998) suggest that the individual civilising process is (more or less) a socialisation process as children have to acquire the adult standards of behaviour and feelings prevalent in their society through learning. In 1980, Elias reflected fully on the individual civilising process, the socialisation of children and the changing relationship between children and their parents in his lecture *The Civilizing*

of Parents (Elias 1980; Goudsblom and Mennell 1998). In this work Elias suggested that despite a growing literature on childhood, the role of parents in helping children to enter a complex society, that demands a high degree of foresight and self-control, is not completely understood. However, for Elias, the fact that 'childhood' had been discovered suggested to him that children are different to adults and only become adults through an individual civilising process. The child from early in life, and through adolescence, is subject to an individual civilising process that shapes their behaviour, and in turn emerge high degrees of self-restraint and foresight in line with the prevalent standards of behaviour at that time (Elias 1980). Krieken (1998) argues that in Elias's work, childhood is the 'main 'transmission belt' for the development of the habitus' (Krieken 1998; 156) of a given society

> Today there is relatively little understanding of the fact that the problems of adolescents concern a combination of the biological processes of maturation on the one hand, that adaption to the current level of societal civilization on the other…Human social life in the form of urban-industrial nation-states encloses each individual person in a complex network of longer more differentiated chains of interdependence. In order to claim to be an adult…in order to fulfil an adults functions…it is necessary to have a very high degree of foresight, restraint of momentary impulses, for the sake of long-term goals and gratifications…it requires a high degree of self-regulating restraint of drives and affects (Elias 1980: 201-202)

Children have to learn the self-control of drives and affects through the course of relations with other people and 'according to the pattern and extent of socially given drive and affect regulation' (Elias 1980: 202). The more complex a society the more complex this process of transition to adulthood or the learning of adult norms becomes. According to Elias, the more complex a society, the more differentiated the social functions are and the more interdependent people become. In such a society, to fulfil the social functions, more foresight is required in order to subordinate 'momentary inclinations to the overriding necessities of interdependence' (Elias 2000: 380; Mennell 1992: 96). For example, if one takes the social function of work, in a complex industrial society such as ours, the structure of drives and affects required for this adult behaviour is further from the behaviour of children than that required in simpler societies. To illustrate this Elias (1980) suggests that in Eskimo society there is a direct developmental line between children's play behaviour (playing with bows and arrows or learning to treat skins) and adult behaviour's of hunting, tent making and survival (Elias 1980: 202). The child's or young person's behaviour corresponds to a high degree with adult reality whereas in complex industrial societies it does not. As such, in a simpler society, Elias (1980) argues

'the individual civilising transformation is temporally shorter and less deep-rooted' (Elias 1980: 202).

A further dimension of adult behaviour that children had to learn through their transition to adulthood was the difference between fantasy and reality. Like other aspects of knowledge and behaviour, the difference between fantasy and reality depends on prevalent standards at that time (i.e. it varies historically and between societies). For example, Mennell (1992) suggests that in industrial complex societies there is a very clear division between fantasy and reality and people have to behave accordingly, if they act out their dreams in a way that conflicts with prevalent standards their sanity will be questioned (Mennell 1992: 162). In other societies, the role of fantasy may differ. For example for the indigenous people of North America dreams and fantasy constitute a large part of their spiritual belief system. However, Elias argues that for children the difference between fantasy and reality is blurred and in *What is Sociology* he wrote

> Dreams often find short-term fulfilment: but in the long run, they virtually always seem to end up drained of substance and destroyed. The reason is that aims and hopes are so heavily saturated with fantasy that the actual course of events in society deals blow after blow, and the shock of reality reveals them as unreal...(Elias 1978: 28)

It is interesting to note that these themes were reflected in the adjustment of the young workers' research and Elias wrote a considerable amount about the individual civilising process and the difference between fantasy and reality in his consideration of school to work transitions.

Adjusting to Work Situations: The Separation from Adults and the Role of Fantasy

> ... I want to say that "culture shock' is in my view a very inappropriate term for what we are getting at. It runs smoothly from the lips, that is quite true, it sounds nice. But we are not trying to find out about a shock which "culture" gives to people. It is the work, the occupation, the whole undreamed of reality of the adult world which is responsible for the stresses of adolescents in that situation...I have always preferred the term "shock-experience", to the term "shock". The most precise expression of which I can think at the moment is probably "reality shock". That is, in fact, what it is likely to be. (Elias 1962, p.1)

In the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*' research, Elias wanted to examine how young people experienced the transition from school to work, not only how people learned to do a job, but also how the young workers acquired the

prevalent adult standards or norms of behaviour. In doing so he focused on their problems of adjustment to work. Elias (1961) suggested that for young people

> ...their entry into work places young workers into a different position not only in relation to parents or to friends, but in relation to adults who are strangers – adult workers, supervisors, managers etc on whom they depend...The norms, the behaviour and attitudes of the adults with which they now come into contact often differ considerably from those with which they are familiar in their own family circle or from their contact with masters at school.(Elias 1961: 1)

For Elias, the norms, and attitudes or new codes of behaviour exhibited by the adults in the workplace involved problems of competition and co-operation, conforming and non-conforming in factory and workshop and coping with tensions in social relations (Elias, 1961: 1). The transition process and the adjustment to working life via the learning of adult norms, for Elias, was not a simple process. The difficulty arose in that the norms, the behaviour and attitudes of adults in the workplace differed considerably to those adults the young people were familiar with. In these 'already known' relationships the position of the young person is clearer as a subordinate to the adult figure. For example a child is subordinate to their parents and a 'teenager' is in a subordinate role to their teacher. Through the processes of sociogenesis and psychogenesis over time a power ratio has emerged in these relationships, which supports the young person's subordination. In turn the young person displays appropriate behaviour. However, in our current society, when the young person begins to make the transition to work and adulthood their role becomes less clear. This, he argues, is due to the limited amount of contact between young people and adults over and above family, friends and teachers. For example, at a meeting of the young worker project team it was argued that

> The central problem arises from the fact that a complex society such as ours requires customarily a prolonged period of indirect preparation and training for adult life. By indirect I mean from the age of 5 to 14,15 or 16, the growing up children of our society are trained for their adult tasks in special institutions which we call schools, where they learn, where they acquire the knowledge about the adult world past, present and future not by direct contact with it, but largely from books. Their actual knowledge of the adult world, their only contacts with adults, are relatively limited. (Young Worker Project, 1962a: 2)

Elias suggested that this is radically different from the children growing up in 'simpler' European societies of previous periods in which children and young people had more direct contact with adults. In our current society problems or difficulties can arise in the

adjustment to adult and work roles as the young workers are now neither fully adult nor fully children and they experience contact with different adults and different norms of adult behaviour. As such, Elias suggested that this research begin with the hypothesis that

> ...nothing, or very little, that the school leaver has been taught has prepared him or her for the experience of starting work; that the experience was a "shock" experience. (Young Worker Project, 1962b: 2)

Elias's notion of shock is reinforced with comments made at the fifth meeting of young worker project team. Here Elias quoted an example of the shock experienced by a young worker at being told not to work too hard. The minutes suggest that Elias argued that the problem could be approached without first needing to find out the adult norm of not working too hard, instead the emphasis should be on 'what the young workers are faced with, as they see it and describe it in talking about their first few weeks in the factory' (Young Worker Project, 1962b: 2). Elias wanted to understand how the young people *experienced* the norm of not working too hard. For example, it could be argued that shock emerges in that the young adults have moved from a situation where adults, in the form of teachers at school, have instructed the young adults to work hard and have administered punishments to those who did not, to a situation where unfamiliar adults are instructing, advising and encouraging the young people to behave in a way that was previously discouraged. The existence of the young worker is threatened by the fact that their social world changes and they come into contact with behaviours and norms that are totally unfamiliar to them. To further illustrate this idea, in meetings and in various memoranda, Elias reflects on the role of money in the transition process. For Elias, one of the main areas of transition to work that required the young worker to learn new behaviours and norms was in the acquisition and management of money. The process of having one's own money and having to work in exchange for this money, represented for Elias a further change in the social reality of the young worker. He suggested that the young people made the transition from a

> ...situation in which money, and food and clothing are given, and received as a right, without anything being given by the child in exchange, to a situation in which money is only given in exchange for work by the receiver. (Young Worker Project, 1962c: 1)

These changes to the social reality of the young worker, experienced as part of the transition from school to work, according to Elias caused anxiety or shock. These assertions by Elias build on points made in *The Civilising Process*.

> Any other behaviour, any breach of the prohibitions or restraints prevailing in their society means danger...And the peculiarly emotional undertone so often associated with moral demands...reflects the danger in which any breach of the prohibitions places the unstable balance of all those for whom the standard behaviour of society has become more or less 'second nature'. These attitudes are symptoms of the anxiety aroused in adults when the structure of their own drives, and with it their own social existence and the social order in which it is anchored is even remotely threatened. (Elias 2000: 141).

Elias argued that the transition from childhood to adulthood, from school to work is one of the great anxiety arousing transitions as the young person's social existence and social order are threatened. In previous societies, according to Elias, ceremonies or 'rites of passage' grew up around the transitions between social roles to help ease the anxiety. Indeed, Elias suggests that all situations, which were liable to arouse fear or anxiety, such as the transition from one socio-biological state to another, were marked by public ceremonies as means of helping the individual contain their fears and anxieties. However Elias suggests that the 'communal ceremonies of passage formerly attached to the transition from childhood to adulthood have completely lapsed' (Elias 1962a: 2).

For Elias, a further contributing factor to the 'shock experience', part of the transition from school to work and adulthood, was the degree of difference between fantasy and reality held by the child versus the reality of the adult world. Indeed Elias (1962) suggests

> Somehow the experience of many youngsters when they grow up in our society seem to me similar. They perceive more the wider choices of adulthood than its restraints and frustrations. (Elias 1962, p.2)

As part of acquiring the prevalent adult standards or norms of behaviour in the work place, the young workers had to also *learn* the prevalent standards in the differences between fantasy and reality at that time. For Elias, the gap between childhood and adolescent dreams and their adult reality is great and, given the absence of relationships between children and other adults (and the adult world), Elias suggested that children have developed fantasies about their future adult role. Children have to develop fantasies about their future adult role as they have not experienced it nor do they have much contact (before they enter work) with adults who have. Elias (1962) goes on

> Before they enter their job, adolescents have a highly selective and still rather unrealistic perception of the adult world and of their life in it. The encounter with reality enforces a reorganisation of their perception. This is a painful process for at least two different reasons. First, because every strongly enforced reorganisation of perceptions is painful. Second, to all intents and purposes the "social reality" to which the youngsters have to get used, is unsatisfactory and the gap between the adult reality as it turns out to be is very great indeed. This is the objective situation...We are after the actual experiences to which it gives rise..."shock-experience" or "reality-shock" understood as something which may have a variety of forms, which may sometimes be sudden and biting and sometimes slowly coming over the years ending in a final shock of recognition that there will never be anything else but that, seems to me our best bet. (Elias 1962, p.1)

For Elias, given the absence of relationships between children and other adults, the differences between the fantasies of future adult roles and the actual reality of adult life, and the encounter with reality, which enforces a reorganisation of perceptions during the transition from school to work, all lead to this experience being one of shock. An example of this could be that the young person before entering work, has a perception or fantasy that work will be a positive experience and will have no negative effect on them. In such a fantasy the young person does not perceive the reality of adult working life as being one without long school holidays, short working days and extended 'break times'. The reality of work is different from the perceptions of the young person and, for Elias, the realisation that nothing will ever be the same in terms of school holidays or the general loss of the 'freedoms' that accompany childhood lead the young person to experience a 'reality-shock'. Interestingly, Elias suggested that the reality shock was greater for girls as they have had a less 'realistic' upbringing as compared to boys.

Elias (1964) further clarified his thoughts on shock and suggested that it was possible to classify each 'interview' in terms of a particular 'reality types'. One of the reality types Elias suggested could be the '*types of relationship between expectation and reality*'. Elias argued that there were three main possibilities that the young workers would experience. First, that expectations of the job would be more or less like school but the reality was that work was indeed very different. For example, the supervisors at work were not like teachers and, whereas at school it was possible to 'mess about' (or act in ways not approved of by adults) when not directly supervised, at work it was not possible to 'mess about' at all . Second, the expectation that work will be terrible and the reality was that work was not as bad as expected. For example, that work would be hard and the young person would be made to work like slaves, whereas the reality was different with

less control of the young person and great possibilities for controlling the pace of work. Finally, the expectation that the freedom from school would be 'marvellous' but the reality of work and adult life were less 'marvellous' than expected. Leaving school would be almost like an escape from the prison-like or controlled realities of education. However, on escaping the young person finds that work is also controlled and provides little opportunity for the individual expression they so desire.

However, to date Elias 'shock hypothesis' has found little support within the literature of youth transitions or from the data. For example, using evidence from the pilot study for the '*Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*' project, Brown *et al* (1963) suggested that the younger members of the sample had hardly had time to get over the excitement at not having to adhere to the rigid discipline of school and earning money to experience the 'shock' which Elias refers to.

> Our examination of the previous work shows it to be an almost universal finding from actual investigations that, at the time of entry to work for young people, the excitement of leaving school and earning a wage over-shadows other feelings, to a large extent. These preliminary attitudes reduce the impact of experiences of work and life as workers, for a time. (Brown *et al*, 1963: 1).

Brown *et al* (1963) argued that the sample needed to be modified and the sample's length of time in work should be increased. They suggested that the sample should include a higher proportion of those who had been in work for two and three years and reduce the numbers who had been in work between six and twelve months. At a meeting of the research committee on 15 May 1963 these suggestions were agreed in Elias's absence. However, during the early part of the discussions Illya Neustadt had reflected that

> ...[at] our last research meeting when [the researchers] were emphatic about the need to investigate young people at work 2-3 years, in the light of the literature, as well as those 6-12 months at work...****** suggests a compromise whereby the bulk will be 6-12 months, and a portion of the sample 2-3years...I was not very keen myself to fall in with these proposals, but there, I remembered after a while your strictures about my committee antics, and gave way to what the committee 'seemed' to want, subject to your being consulted first. (Neustadt, 1962: 1-2)

Elias's perceptions relating to the centrality of money in the shock experience were also questioned during the early phases of the research, with the minutes recording the view that

> ...the change from a situation of economic dependence and security in the home to a situation where the young worker had to earn his [sic] own living was in fact a relatively long drawn out process, beginning for example, with a newspaper round, to earn pocket money, at the age of 12 or 14, and not being complete until the young worker married and left his [sic] parental home at the age of 21. This might ease the adjustment and dissipate the shock. (Young Worker Project, 1962c: 1)

Likewise, Ashton and Field (1976) also argued that most young people did not experience severe problems of adjustment during the transition from school to work. They suggest that the view that young people experience shock due to the fact they are isolated from work in educational establishments and suddenly released into work is erroneous and at best common sense. They argue that previous experiences at home, school and amongst their peer groups actually prepares them well to fit in or adjust to the demands of starting work (Ashton and Field 1976: 12).

Conclusions

In terms of the shock-hypothesis it is clear that Elias was trying to further elaborate on, and explore, ideas presented elsewhere within the body of his work. However, despite the findings of Brown *et al* (1963) Ashton and Field (1976) in which a sample of the '*Adjustment of Young Workers'* data was used, after a re-examination of the data it is clear that some of the respondents *did* experience the shock that Elias reflected upon, but certainly not to the degree that Elias predicted. The examination of the empirical evidence relating to the shock experience is presented elsewhere[6]. However, there a number of issues that remain regarding the shock hypothesis that may eventually question the full legitimacy of this approach. First, and perhaps foremost, although the Elias approach does have links to his broader body of theoretical work, the actual origins of his concern with the problems of adjustment and the adjustment as shock remain unclear. What is clear is that Elias's overarching concern in this research did emerge before any of the data was collected and continued after those in the field had indicated there was little evidence to support it.

Second, in many ways the experience of shock, the separation of children from the adult world and the lack of knowledge of work highlighted by Elias as being significant, may actually more accurately reflect the experience of middle class youth as opposed to working class youth. What is clear from the data is that working class youth did not make

the transition in isolation from other children, friends and family and in many cases their introduction to work was through family and friends. Likewise the data also indicates that many of the young workers had actually worked before they had left school and had some understanding of what work was all about. The class based experiences of youth may actually have mediated against the likelihood of shock being experienced.

A final issue relates to the general approach and the assertion that shock emerges from the difference between fantasy and reality. It is clear that for the majority of young people there is a difference between their expectations of work and their actual experiences of work. However, not all young people display signs of shock.

This is a little known area of Elias's work that demands further exploration and enquiry as it supplements many of his earlier ideas and other works. It is the *only* large-scale empirical project (in the traditional sense) that Elias was involved in and it was the only UK Government research grant he ever obtained. It is known that Elias expressed regrets for what had happened during this research and that in the main it remains a 'lost' project. As such a fuller consideration is clearly merited. However, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the project was problematic at the time and caused difficulties for all involved and, as such, their views need to be explored and documented as well.

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Notes

[1] This paper is part of an ESRC project '*From Young Workers To Older Workers: Reflections on Work in the Life Course'* (R000223653). This project aims to build upon the data originally collected by Elias and the young worker project team by re-analysing the data and by tracing two hundred of the original respondents for follow-up interviews. A version of this paper was presented at the British Sociological Association Conference, University of Leicester, 2002.

[2] The Research Officers were Teresa Keil (1962-1964) and David Riddell (1962-1964). Their work was also supported by a research assistant, Colin Tipton (1962-1963) and Bryan Green (1963-1964).

[3] In the mid 1990s Sheila Allen, Richard Brown and Teresa Keil were asked to write a chapter for a book on their experiences of working with Norbert Elias. The chapter was entitled *Working With Norbert Elias: Recollecting Experiences* and deals extensively with the Young Worker Project and their experiences of this research. However, as yet this chapter remains unpublished.

[4] This does in no way imply that any of those named had any involvement in the difficult later stages of the project. Indeed, as the archive material suggests almost all had moved on to other projects and concerns well before the fieldwork ended in 1964 (See Illya Neudstadt's letter to Elias, 8 June 1964).

[5] The authors were fortunate to visit and view the archive of Elias papers at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Germany with the aid of a grant from the University of Leicester Research Fund (Grant number FS14002). We would also like to acknowledge the help of the staff and the Deutsches Literaturarchiv for their assistance and to express our thanks to the Norbert Elias foundation in granting us permission to quote the material.

[6] For a full exploration of the data see Goodwin, J and O'Connor, H - *Norbert Elias and 'Shock' in the Adjustment to Work Situations: Data and Case Studies*. Centre For Labour Market Studies, Forthcoming.

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